

Feast of the Holy Name ~ January 1, 2017  
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera  
Readings: Numbers 6:22-27, Philippians 2:5-11, Psalm 8, Luke 2:15-21

Today we celebrate New Year's Day and the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. Two weeks ago, on the Sunday before Christmas, the opening words of Deacon Holly's children's sermon described the importance of naming, particularly as newborn children enter the world. She talked about the name of Jesus and how it came to be, as well as the other names ascribed to Jesus found in the Bible such as Messiah – which means “deliverer”, the promise that God made the Jews who put their faith in God. Deacon Holly said that, “People spend a lot of time picking out names for their children. God is no different.” Following her footsteps, I will redefine the name of our Lord Jesus, or Yeshua in Hebrew, which means “God saves”. We all know that Jesus is also called the “Christ”, a Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah or “anointed king”. For the people of Abrahamic religions including Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Messiah means savior. Over time, the name Jesus has come to mean redeemer of sin and savior of souls. Especially during Christmastime, we also hear Jesus called Emmanuel, a Greek name rooted in two Hebrew words, “immanu” – “with us,” and “el” – “God” – or, God with us.

I like biblical names because they describe the hopes and dreams, perhaps even the mission and purpose that some parents want for their newborn children. In my brief time as a missionary on behalf of the diocese of Massachusetts in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa, and also in meeting Christians of diverse African descent here, I've learned that the names given to newborn children sometimes reflects the circumstances at the time of the baby's birth as well as their hope and faith for their child. For example, Mosi means first born in Swahili, and Kibwe means blessed also in Swahili, and Meklit in the Amharic language of Ethiopia, means gift to God. In the African countries where Christianity took hold and English is used, prophetic names such as Eucharist, Love, Peace, Hope, Felicity, and Emmanuel are common names.

There is an intentionality in the naming of a child, an intentionality that God had when he sent the Angel Gabriel to instruct Mary and Joseph to name their son Jesus - God saves. God didn't mess around with the name of His Son, our Lord. In the name, Jesus, it is intended for people of faith to find hope, mission, purpose, fulfillment, and expectation for what is to come. On this first day of the year 2017 I invite you to think about the name of our Savior Jesus, and to focus on two aspects of the incarnation of God in Him: hope and faith.

From the beginning of time, humanity has lived with uncertainty, and uncertainty continues to be part of the human story. Most recently, the concerns for many people living in

America include unity or the lack thereof, security, culture and ethics, the economy, politics, family, possibilities, and impossibilities. None of these aspects of our lives have certainty, but God gave his only Son Jesus, the Messiah, Yeshua, Emmanuel to give us hope that all would be well by Him, and with Him, and in Him and as our source of faith that in time we would be united to Him forever. That is a huge statement made by God, and it all started with a name – Jesus.

I invite you now to reflect briefly on another name ascribed to Jesus, Emmanuel. This name appears three times in the Bible as a proclamation from God that humanity would never be left alone despite the uncertainties of life. The word appears twice in the book of the Prophet Isaiah (7:14, 8:8) describing God's presence among the people and once as a proper name for Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (1:23). Christians are reminded constantly in the incarnation of God through the Holy Spirit to live with the hope and faith that the incarnation of God in Jesus has never and will never fail to be present. In these challenging times, people seem to forget that God is with us. While we will suffer the consequences of the choices made by mortals, how can we reconcile with faith and hope that Christ is indeed present in us and with us? How can we let hopelessness and despair be replaced by hope and more faith? How can we believe by faith that while the world may be broken, that brokenness won't take away our hope or faith? The name Emmanuel itself represents the Good News of Christ's love for peoples of all nations.

Yes, God is with us. Once we affirm this, once we understand that God is always with us, then Christ expects us to act by moving toward that God who intentionally calls us by name to step out of the familiar; to love and serve strangers, the marginalized, others beyond our family and our friends. In this New Year, I invite you to act more and fear less. How? Each one of us must figure that out for ourselves. But we must all open our eyes and ears a little more and be more aware of what and who is happening around us, to be more obedient to God than to our whims, to respond more intently through prayer and reflection so that we may respond to the revelation of Christ in front of us.

I was inspired recently by the faithfulness and hopefulness of a parishioner whose medical diagnosis became more uncertain and confusing over a nine-month period. Her biggest fear was death and her biggest hope was life. One afternoon during a visit, she cried as she considered the uncertainty of her mortality, but within minutes she straightened up in her chair and glowed with the hope and faith that neither she or her family would be abandoned by God. Her spiritual power was as clear to me as the name her mother had given her. Why I witnessed this manifestation from God was because I went, I made her a priority. I was glad to have listened to God and visited her that day. She told me that her faith was the one thing that sustained her and that no one could ever take away from her. She held on to that basic raw spiritual force and I perceived the Holy Spirit that filled her. She was a gift of grace that God

gave me as I listened to the presence of “God with us” revealed through her in that moment. That visit was a gift that allowed me to witness faith, hope, love, and passion in the life of a person for whom Christ is all.

So, what can you do to ensure you respond when God calls your Holy Name? That’s up to you to discover. My only encouragement is to allow the Holy Spirit to walk with you, talk to you, and transform your hopelessness, anxiety, doubts, and questions into courage, compassion, love, prayer, and life. Rely on the spiritual curiosity that God has given you to seek and share – as Jesus the Christ did. Amén.